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Asia Society Breakfast
“The U.S. Approach the Six-Party Talks”
Remarks as Prepared
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Thank you for the invitation to be with you today. I appreciate this opportunity to speak for a little bit on my thoughts regarding North Korea and the six-party talks.

This past January, I was able to travel to Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing. It was a short, but active trip, and I had the opportunity to meet with many dignitaries, including President Roh of South Korea, Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon, Foreign Minister Taro Aso, and Wu Bangguo, Chairman of China's National People's Congress.

The day before I traveled to Beijing, news broke that Kim Jong-il had decided to take a train trip through China. I stayed on the lookout but our paths did not cross.

Looking at the region as a whole, it is clear there are tensions between the “big three.” Mostly they stem from Prime Minister Koizumi's continued visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.

Each of the three nations says that good relations with their neighbors is of paramount importance, yet none are willing to take the first step to rectify the current situation. China says that the present difficulties are not attributable to China. That what is important is that the Japanese leader changes his actions. The President of Korea refuses to meet with Prime Minister Koizumi. And Japan basically says they cannot accept China and Korea's position and there are no mutual understandings on this subject.

Beyond the Yasukuni Shrine, you've got Japan as the traditional economic power in the region who is seeing their economy grow again. You've got an emerging economic power in China who just recently became the fourth largest economy in the world and has overtaken the United States as Japan and Korea's largest trading partner. Japan is quick to remind those who will listen, however, that their economy is still three times the size of China's. And there is Korea, trying hard not to be overlooked in the region by promoting their goal of becoming the trade hub of East Asia.

I could use our entire time this morning just to talk about the tensions in the region, but even with their disagreements and competition for influence, there was one issue that all parties agreed resulted in beneficial joint cooperation and coordination – the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program.

Now it is no surprise that each of the participants is a party to the talks for different reasons than the United States.

In just about every meeting I went to in Beijing, it was impressed upon me how much China needs long-term regional peace and stability. With 24 million people looking for new jobs each year, even an annual economic growth rate of 8-9% will only create 9-10 million jobs – far short of what the Communist Party needs to maintain stability and control. Having to monitor their border with North Korea, or deal with a collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime, is not in Beijing's interests.

Nor does Beijing want to see North Korea retain its nuclear program because Japan and South Korea may very well follow suit. The 1998 Taepo Dong missile launch over Japan really changed the mindset of the Japanese public. Spending on defense measures is much easier to obtain, as was the passage of laws that allow greater military activity outside of Japan.

Seoul is afraid that if the talks do not succeed, Beijing will increase its influence over North Korea to Seoul's detriment. Thus the ability to conduct joint talks where each party is in unison has great appeal to them. In addition, the current leadership in Seoul is focused on the potential reunification of North and South Korea, making the use of force, in Seoul's view, not an option.

Japan's view of North Korea is probably the most similar to the United States'. While they have held bilateral talks with Pyongyang to discuss the normalization of relations, the abduction of Japanese citizens, and security issues, they have been insistent that the six-party talks take top priority.

But even as there is recognition of the benefits of the six-party talks, cracks are showing in the alliance and North Korea is trying very hard to widen those gaps.

The United States has expressed considerable concern about North Korea's nuclear weapons program. As North Korea develops missiles with greater ranges, our threat perception of being vulnerable to a nuclear strike increases – and news reports suggest North Korea is readying a potential test launch of its Taepo Dong 2 missile. But for South Korea, a North Korean nuclear program does not increase their threat perception at all – they've always been in Pyongyang's cross sights through the use of conventional weapons.

Seoul is roughly 30 miles south of the demilitarized zone. 70% of North Korea's military are within 40 miles of the Korean border. That puts Seoul, and millions of Koreans, well within North Korean missile range. That is a threat the Korean people have woken up to every day for the past 53 years. Quite frankly, it is a threat that many of the younger generation, who were not around for the Korean War, do not believe is realistic. They are more focused on economics, making money, and what a potential reunification of the Korean Peninsula would mean to them.

Likewise, the purpose of our troops on the Korean Peninsula is shifting. In my meeting with U.S. Forces Korea, I was told that there is no longer a shared vision with our South Korean hosts of what the threat is. Much like NATO, we need to redefine our alliance not for what we stand against, but what we stand for. Clearly, South Korea's view of the threat posed by North Korea is not that same as the United States'.

From China's point of view, they are concerned that action by the United States on the counterfeit currency issue is harming their ability to bring Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. I was told that Beijing is working on their North Korean counterparts in their own ways and that the U.S. must trust China to bring the talks back on track. Basically, the message was that if the United States would stop making a mess of things, they could get the talks going again and the overall chance of achieving peace, stability, and denuclearization is good.

And from Japan's perspective, while they support a unified approach in the six-party talks, they are also under tremendous pressure from their citizens to pressure North Korea on the abduction issue. While the six-party talks are bigger in a security context, Japan views the humanitarian aspect of the abduction issue as just as important. If the United States is going to bring up the issue of counterfeit currency in the six-party context, then Japan will want their abduction issue included as well.

So there is a growing split on how to deal with North Korea. Do we stand firm in our approach, insisting that North Korea take unilateral action to meet the United States' demands, or do we give North Korea something to hang their hat on?

I will start with the premise that negotiating with North Korea can be the most mind-boggling frustrating experience you can imagine. It's worse than trying to negotiate rush-hour traffic in Washington D.C...

North Korea routinely engages in a brinkmanship negotiating style where they create a contentious situation in order to gain concessions from interested parties. In my view, the Bush Administration's unwillingness to go along with this ploy, and instead insist that negotiations take place through the six-party talks is a tremendous credit to the President. North Korea has realized that they cannot threaten and bluster their way to additional compromises when they are faced with the unified front of its neighbors, its most important trading partners, and its sources of economic and financial assistance.

The agreement that was reached last September through the six-party talks was hailed by all of the officials I visited with. They were sincerely pleased that the principle of denuclearization was agreed to. The question was how to implement it. Each of the parties is of the mind set that North Korea knew what it agreed to, and Pyongyang's bluster shortly after the agreement was simply that – bluster. In South Korea and China's view, the introduction of the counterfeit currency issue only gave North Korea an excuse not to return to the table. They urge the United States to prioritize its goals and have patience with the talks.

I agree. The United States must focus its efforts toward North Korea first and foremost on the nuclear issue. While the issues of currency counterfeiting, weapons proliferation, and human rights are all very important, the reality is that without an agreement on the primary source of irritation, there will be no progress on the other issues either. We need to solve the nuclear issue first, and then concentrate on getting North Korea to act on other areas of concern.

Too often in this age of the internet, instant messaging, and twenty-four hour service, we in Congress and the United States expect immediate results from our efforts. But sometimes we need to step back and see the forest instead of the trees. We need to recognize that it took four rounds of talks just to reach an agreement on the principle of North Korea's denuclearization – but that was progress. It has been 53 years since the end of the Korean War. That is 53 years of mutual distrust which is not going to be resolved overnight.

That concept also leads me to the second premise my thoughts are based on: the number one objective of Pyongyang is the preservation of the Kim il-Sung and Kim Jong-il regime. This is a regime that if it is about to collapse, will be looking around to see who they can bring down with them.

I was told quite bluntly by individuals who have traveled to Pyongyang and met with Kim Jong-il that North Korea does not believe the United States will abandon the notion of attacking North Korea. On the other end of the spectrum, following North Korea's violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework that froze its nuclear program, there is little trust by the United States for North Korea. Add to that the United States' rejection of an action-for-action, commitment-for-commitment strategy put forward by our allies to the talks and there is little opportunity for trust to develop.

I do believe North Korea wants some degree of normalization of relations to happen; but they are not willing to “lose face” by unilaterally acquiescing to the United States’ demands. I believe this desire for normal relations was evident when they eagerly pointed to the respect President Bush showed their leader by calling him “Mr.” Kim Jong-il at one point last year. Their enthusiasm quickly dissipated when they realized the remark was in jest.

North Korea has now expressed desire on two occasions for our lead negotiator to the six-party talks, Chris Hill, to visit Pyongyang. The Administration rejected the first invitation. It remains to be seen what the final response to the more recent invitation will be.

Kim Jong-il has taken several trips to China and Russia in the past few years to study their economies. Pyongyang is highly aware of what is going on in the outside world and these visits indicate a willingness to consider outside ideas. For a country whose official ideology is *juche*, which roughly translated means self-reliance, looking to other countries for ideas is a significant step forward.

There are signs that Pyongyang is allowing some economic reform – not a free market by any stretch of the imagination, but there are reports that shop keepers in the North are offering products “on sale” with discounted prices. A practice previously unheard of.

So I think there is willingness by North Korea to implement change. They are not averse to listening to the advice of outside parties. As each of the parties to the six-party talks noted, North Korea knows what it signed up for in the last round of six-party talks where an agreement in principle was reached for the denuclearization of North Korea. They know what their commitments are.

“Silly woman” some might say – this is North Korea’s game. They make you think you have a commitment in order to gain concessions, and then back out unless you give them more. And that is certainly true on the bilateral sense. Through the six-party talks, however, North Korea must face up to much more than one nation throwing up its hands in frustration.

In my meetings with the leaders of China and South Korea, I was told that if North Korea is dealt with in good faith, neither China nor South Korea are willing to let North Korea back out of its commitments. It would simply be too much of an embarrassment to them.

When North Korea reneged on its 1994 commitment to freeze its nuclear program, the only nation that sought action against North Korea for their conduct was the United States. The difference between the commitments made in 1994, and the agreement last September, is the use of the six-party talks. Now, a breach of faith would be felt by five nations, including North Korea's leading sources of energy, food aid, and financial assistance. North Korea knows it cannot spurn China or South Korea without significant impact to itself.

I am not advocating giving in to North Korea's demands when they have done nothing in return.

What I am advocating for is the willingness of the United States to take confidence and trust building steps with North Korea within the context of the six-party talks, such as having our negotiator go to Pyongyang – not in the context of bilateral negotiations as North Korea has asked for, and that is a point that must be made expressly clear, but in the context of taking advantage of an opportunity to build trust. This is not a tremendous give – it does not commit the United States to anything other than an expression of willingness to improve the current situation, and I want to believe that is the goal of the United States.

We must also be consistent in our actions and in our statements. Our negotiators can say one thing, only to have their North Korean counterparts point to a contradictory statement made by an Administration official in the same time frame that lets North Korea off the hook. Any commitment they may have made, they can now play the, "you say this but you don't mean it" card.

We have all seen North Korea waffle on its promises in the past. We know they are difficult to pin down on their commitments. But considering the options to the six-party talks, we are better off continuing to push forward with this effort.

The United States has worked hard to develop a unified stance with our partners in the six-party talks. We have all of the right players on our side. Now we must keep them there. We need to prioritize our goals; engage North Korea in confidence and trust building activities; and be consistent in our statements.

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